Profile: Ronnie Fox

Ronnie Fox is one of the top independent analytical chemists working with fats and oils. He's won the AOCS Doughtie Award for best analysis of cottonseed eight times, including five of the past six years. He's won the Smalley Award, for oilseed meal analysis – twice. In 1979, he scored a rare achievement in the AOCS check sample program by winning both awards the same year.

As a youngster, Fox was not favorably impressed by high school chemistry. In fact, he says he knew he didn't want to make a career with the equation balancing and other calculations emphasized in high school chemistry. But after two years at Texas A & I University and two years in the Army, Fox in 1959 found himself looking for a job during what was then termed a recession. A state agency referred Fox to Burt O. Pattison's Southwestern Labs in Harlingen, Texas.

The world of commercial analytical chemistry, Fox found, was much different from his high school chemistry experience. It was a challenge that suited him well, which Pattison was quick to recognize. Fox said Pattison gave him what amounted to a college course in wet chemistry as well as encouragement to improve.

About two years later, on recommendation of a friend, Fox received a job offer from Paul Cretien at Texas Testing Laboratories in Lubbock. Cretien, who has been an AOCS member since 1926, continued Fox's training.

Pattison and Cretien were regular participants in the Smalley check sample program (Pattison still is) and consistently high placers. Cretien received the Smalley award for oilseed meal analysis three consecutive years (1951-52-53) as well as the cottonseed analysis top award in 1962 and 1964.

In 1969, Fox won first place in the cottonseed analysis competition. And about that same time he also realized that some day he wanted to operate his own testing lab. Texas Testing Lab owner Paul Cretien did not have any family interested in continuing in that business. Cretien indicated to Fox that when and if Cretien did decide to sell out and retire, Fox would have a chance to buy. Texas Testing did both chemical and physical testing, not all of it agricultural related. When Cretien did decide in the late 1970s to retire, two specialists in nondestructive (physical) testing bought in, and Fox was able to acquire the agricultural testing portion, including all the firm's equipment for agricultural analysis and the lab facility in Lubbock. The new firm was named Fox Testing Laboratories.

Fox Testing Labs runs about 35,000 analyses a year on cottonseed, peanut, soybeans, sunflower seed, oils cakes and meal, protein concentrates, cottonseed oil, soybean oil, peanut oil, cellulose yields, aflatoxin in cottonseed products, water, grains, grain mixtures and feedstuffs. In recent years, there have been increasing requests for pesticide and herbicide residue analysis. Fox estimates the lab run 10,000 to 15,000 samples a year on cottonseed and cottonseed products from oil mills in Texas, Arizona and California. That total may decline this year, perhaps by about one-third, because of the federal government acreage reduction program, Fox says.

The lab employs six persons, including Fox's brother Glenn as an analyst and Fox's wife, Marva, who handles bookkeeping and similar tasks. Fox and Marva have a 5-year-old son, Chad, who is a soccer player. Fox's two sons by an earlier marriage, Todd, 14, and Jason, 12, are baseball players. Fox is a self-described "golf nut" who shoots in the middle 80s.

The official samples for the Smalley Check Sample program are of prime importance when they arrive, Fox says. He does the analysis of the cottonseed sample, and his staff does a duplicate test. Fox takes pride in his co-workers' accomplishments. Pat Muniz of Fox Testing Labs finished first in the cottonseed oil analysis competition this year.

Doing well in the Smalley program is important to independent chemists, for it enables them to be certified as AOCS Official Referee Chemists. Although there isn't a large amount of "referee" work, the designation is a type of hallmark that attracts business from oil mills that want reliable labs doing the routine, as well as the special, analyses.

Fox is a tanned, robust individual who looks as though he spends more time outdoors than inside an analytical lab. He says he has achieved his major vocational goals—becoming a top analytical chemist and owning his own firm.

His success in the analytical chemistry business, Fox says, is because "I had good teachers—Burt Pattison and Paul Cretien."